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ABSTRACT

Concerns have been raised about declining college enrollment of minority students despite increasing high school graduation rates. Addressing such "pipeline" issues is critical for increasing the supply of minority professionals in public school teaching and administration, school counseling, and school psychology. Focus group discussions were undertaken to broaden the understanding of these issues and to guide the development of appropriate resource materials; participants in these discussions were 139 seventh and eighth graders and 109 of their parents. All participants were black. Students were identified as academically or economically "at risk" or were interested in going to college or possessed the potential to do college work. Ten recommendations for project development were made: (1) assemble and work with a local task force from key minority organizations; (2) communicate with parents and families about availability of assistance to students; (3) organize parent support groups; (4) provide parenting skills assistance; (5) conduct workshops for parents about testing, tracking, graduation requirements, etc.; (6) provide parents with information about education careers; (7) collect and distribute information regarding policies, requirements, and common practices affecting academic success and opportunities for college enrollment; (8) provide opportunities for cultural enrichment to enhance development of minority students; (9) sponsor structured career-planning programs for minority students; and (10) bring minority educators together to discuss their role in recruiting future minority educators. (ABL)

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Looking to the Future: Focus-Group Discussions About College and Careers With Minority Middle-School Students and Parents

Prepared by Blackwater Associates, Inc.
in conjunction with Sanita L. Savage

September 1989

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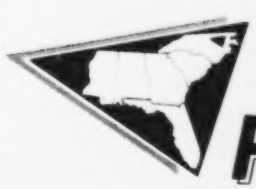

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Executive Summary

Concerned about the declining college enrollment of minority students despite increasing high school graduation rates and conscious of the impact of tracking students into noncollege preparatory curricula, the Southeastern Educational Improvement Laboratory sought to learn more about minority students' and parents' perceptions of what it takes to prepare for and be successful in college.

Addressing such "pipeline" issues is critical for increasing the supply of minority professionals in public school teaching and administration, school counseling, and school psychology. The focus-group discussions described in the full report were undertaken to broaden the Lab's understanding of these issues and guide the development of appropriate resource materials.

The focus-group discussions were held in South Carolina in the spring of 1989. A total of 139 7th- and 8th-graders and 109 parents participated in these discussions. All of the participants were black. The students were identified by school personnel as either 1) academically or economically "at risk" or 2) interested in going to college or possessing the potential to do college work. All of the adults who participated in the focus groups were parents, guardians, or family members of children participating in the discussions or of children meeting selection criteria.

Highlights from the full report follow.

Student Responses

* Most of the students aspired to careers that require four years of college, and they are aware of this requirement for their "ideal future."

* The students did not see a connection between their abilities or interests and the achievement of their dreams for the future.

* The majority of students had given little thought to what subjects or course level "good grades" should be earned in. They did not make a distinction between more or less demanding courses, nor did they indicate that it is important to do well in courses related to one's career plans.

* Few students understood the term "tracking" or could describe how it works. Students in every focus group described tracking as having something to do with a test, that determines the courses they take in school. Students in every discussion group reported that teachers and school counselors tell them it is important to do well on these tests, but they are not sure why it is important to do well on them.

* All of the students have heard of college-preparatory courses. Most of them know that if they want to go to college, they should take these courses. However, only about one-half of the students who knew that college-preparatory courses are needed for college also knew whether they were enrolled in such classes.

* The majority of the students were attracted to professional positions because they felt that these jobs command good salaries, are interesting, allow autonomy, and provide opportunities to travel and buy nice things. However, a majority of the students had little specific knowledge of what particular professions involve.

* As many as 10 percent of the students in each focus group have family members in the military and describe it as a good career choice. Students cited travel, good pay, and money for education as positive aspects of a military career. They also believe that people who go into the service learn a skill or a trade that can be used after military service.

* When asked whether they would consider a career in education, the students' immediate responses were negative. Fewer than five students expressed an interest in teaching, and these students did so because of admiration for a special teacher or interest in a favorite subject.

* The majority of the students expressed distaste for the teaching profession because of low pay, a lot of extra work, few rewards, and the requirement to be in school all the time with angry, disruptive, and "bad" children.

* According to students in all of the focus groups, black teachers teach them more, expect more of them, and push them harder to be successful than white teacners. Only about 5 percent of the students we spoke to do not see any advantage in having a black teacher.

Parent Responses

* Most of the parents wanted their children to complete high school and go to college, preferably a four-year college. A few of them envisioned cosmetology school or technical college in their children's "ideal future."

* Only a few parents had any specific ideas about how to help their children achieve the "ideal future."

* Ambivalence about "pushing" children was expressed by the parents. They either had direct personal experience or indirect knowledge of children who had been "pushed too far." When asked about the effects of being pushed, parents talked about students' rebelling, making bad grades, talking back, leaving home, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and committing suicide.

* Very few parents clearly understand tracking and its effects on their children. Like the students, the parents are aware that the school offers both college-preparatory and general courses. However, the majority of them are unsure about how students are placed in one track versus another. They are equally unaware of the significance of being placed in a general or basic track as opposed to the college-preparatory or academic track.

* A majority of parents in all of the groups did not want their children to become teachers. Like the students, these parents said that teachers are not sufficiently paid, have few opportunities for advancement, and are forced to cope with uninterested, aggressive students.

* The majority of parents in every community reported that teaching is perceived as a valuable job that makes important contributions to the community, but they also acknowledged that education is not as respected as it once was. These parents also observed that educated, black adults now have many opportunities beyond "preaching and teaching."

* According to the parents, both white and black teachers are caring and helpful, and both can work effectively with children. The special value of a black teacher, however, is the example he or she sets for black students, as well as his or her sensitivity to and understanding of minority children. Some parents suggested that black teachers also may be more demanding of minority children.

Recommendations of the focus-group facilitators include:

* Use all possible methods to communicate with parents and families about the availability of assistance to help children achieve success in school, make appropriate career choices, and enroll and do well in college.

* Organize parent support groups to provide parents with the opportunity to talk about problems with their children and share solutions.

* Conduct workshops for parents to help them become more knowledgeable about testing, tracking, high school graduation requirements, college entrance requirements, and financial aid.

* Provide parents with accurate information regarding the salaries, responsibilities, opportunities for advancement, and varied options in education careers.

* Collect and distribute information regarding state, local, and school policies; requirements; and common practices affecting academic success and opportunities for college enrollment.

* Sponsor structured career-planning programs for minority students in schools or the community and request that additional activities take place in the schools.

I. Introduction

Background

> The public schools educate and socialize all the nation's children. Schools form children's opinions about the larger society and their own futures. The race and background of their teachers tells them something about authority and power in contemporary America. These messages influence children's attitudes toward school, their academic accomplishments, and their views of their own and others' intrinsic worth. The views they form in school about justice and fairness also influence their future citizenship.
> [From A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century, Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, May 1986]

The Southeastern Educational Improvement Laboratory is committed to improving school effectiveness in the Southeast. There is evidence that faculty and staff who are similar to the student population are more likely to be sensitive to student needs and to hold higher expectations for student achievement than adults who are unlike them (Hawley, 1989). Therefore, the Lab places a high priority on increasing the supply of minority educators. As part of that commitment, the Lab is undertaking a project, called "Doing FINE: The FUTURE IS NOW in EDUCATION," to encourage local community organizations to help prepare minority youngsters for college and recruit them into the education professions.

Concerned about the declining college enrollment of minority students despite increasing high school graduation rates and conscious of the impact of tracking students into noncollege preparatory curricula, the Lab sought to learn more about minority students' and parents' perceptions of what it takes to prepare for and be successful in college. Addressing such "pipeline" issues is critical for increasing the supply of minority professionals in public school teaching and administration, school counseling, and school psychology. The focus-group discussions described in this report were undertaken to broaden

the Lab's understanding of these issues and guide the development of appropriate resource materials.

Methodology

The focus-group method has long been a marketing technique for determining the opinions, attitudes, and shared beliefs of consumers. Recently, educational researchers and administrators have adopted it in order to gather information to guide policy-making and program development. In the study described in this report, focus groups were used to identify the college-related information needs of minority middle-school students and parents so that a useful program could be developed to address those needs.

Children, and parents to a lesser extent, are influenced by the values, attitudes, and choices of their peers (Kunjufu, 1988). Talking with groups of students and parents who know one another and share many community and school experiences enables focus-group facilitators to observe these influences and gain insight into commonly held opinions and beliefs.

Focus groups are most effective with small groups of participants, usually 8 to 15 people. The presence of two focus-group facilitators enables one to ask questions and keep the participants on task while the other takes notes and observes the discussion. These roles can be reversed several times during each focus-group session. The facilitators direct the discussion, using a structured format of questions, and probe for clarification or amplification of the ideas and attitudes expressed by the participants (Dexter, 1970; Downs, et al., 1983; Jahoda, et al., 1959).

Recruitment of Participants

In soliciting proposals for this work, the Lab did not require the facilitators to conduct focus groups in more than one southeastern state.

However, a representative mix of urban, suburban, and rural students and parents was required. For the sake of time and cost, all of the focus groups were held within easy traveling distance of the facilitators, both of whom are based in South Carolina. The table below briefly describes the four South Carolina school districts from which the participants were recruited. All of the participants are black.

Participating Districts and Schools

District A	Students	Parents
37 % on free/reduced lunch		
43 % minority enrollment		
Small-city school	10	9
Small-city school	12	9
Suburban school	16	10
District B		
42 % free/reduced lunch		
46 % minority enrollment		
Rural school	16	10
Small-city school	15	5
District C		
60 % free/reduced lunch		
60 % minority enrollment		
Rural school	10	9
Rural school	13	14
Rural school	13	
District D		
57% free/reduced lunch		
73 % minority enrollment		
Rural school	13	9
Urban housing project	13	14
Urban housing project	8	20
Total contacts	139	109

The Lab sent an introductory letter to superintendents and principals in the districts that were selected for the project. Once permission to proceed was secured from the central office in each school district, the facilitators

worked with principals and school counselors to identify participants and schedule the focus-group discussions.

School personnel were asked to identify a group of minority seventh- and eighth-graders who 1) were academically and/or economically "at-risk" and 2) either wanted to go to college or had the potential to do college work (based on grades, test scores, and/or teacher or administrator assessment). For the most part, the student sessions were scheduled during school hours on school premises. The student groups met with the facilitators either in classrooms, libraries, offices, or cafeterias. As an incentive, each participating student received coupons from a local fast-food franchise.

Most of the parents also were recruited by school staff. All of the adults who participated in the focus groups were parents, guardians, or family members of children participating in the discussions or of children meeting selection criteria. Parents were contacted by letters sent home with students, by telephone, or in person at meetings and school activities. School personnel were asked to identify more persons than necessary at each site to improve the prospects of getting at least eight participants in each group. This practice resulted in only one larger-than-desirable group (one of the urban housing projects in District D). While most of the parents met in the evening for discussions at the school, one group that worked the night shift at a local plant agreed to meet there during the day. Each parent received a $10 honorarium for participating in the focus-group discussions.

Scheduling focus groups in some of the urban schools proved especially difficult. Therefore, the focus-group facilitators contacted the Resident Family Services Office of the metropolitan housing authority. The activities director for the low-income housing projects identified students and parents to

participate in the focus groups. The students met during an activity period at the local community center. Parents met at the same location in the evening.

Report Overview

The remainder of this report recounts the facilitators' discussions with groups of minority students and parents. Parallel interview formats were used with students and parents. Each section of the report covers a different general topic. Within sections, responses are organized by type of group responding (students or parents) and by subsets of questions within each general topic area. Quotations are identified only by location of school (urban, suburban, small-city, or rural). It was not possible to collect individual-level data about students and parents.

II. The Future, Success, and "Enough" Education

Rationale

To start the focus group discussions and "break the ice," students and parents were asked to talk about the future--their own or their children's. We wanted to see if college or a career in education would come up without our prompting the participants. We also asked questions about the future and definitions of "success" to get a sense for the level of personal aspiration among the participants. Participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of what is "enough" education in order to determine their awareness of the level of education that will be sufficient to achieve their goals.

Student Responses

1. **What is your ideal future? Imagine that you could live anywhere you want, you could make the kind of money you'd like to make, you would have the type of job that you'd like to have. What would it be like?**

Approximately three-fourths of the students were able to articulate what they want to do in their future. They want to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists, business owners, nurses, singers, "rappers," professional athletes, and computer technicians or programmers. Fewer than five students mentioned teaching as a possible career choice.

> I think I want to be somebody who blows things up, you know, some kind of engineer. (Urban)

> I'm gonna be playing basketball--I want to play for the Chicago Bulls. That's my favorite team. (Rural)

Most of the students identified careers for which four years of college are required, and the students are aware of this requirement. Even the majority of the males who want to be professional athletes expressed the desire to attend college. The students who expressed interest in data-processing and

other computer-related fields are aware that two years of college may be enough for them to get a job.

The remaining 25 percent of the students in the focus groups were not able to articulate a vision for the future. Even after being given time to think, some students could not identify any career goals. One rural student stated, "I hadn't thought about that yet because I might change my mind." Others simply shrugged their shoulders or said they did not know what they want to do in the future. Students in urban focus groups had the greatest difficulty identifying a career choice.

> I don't know, I might be in jail. (Urban)
>
> I don't know. I guess I'll think about it when I get to high school. (Small-city)

Most of the students want to make "a lot of money" and do not want to come back to their communities to pursue their chosen professions. We asked them to define "a lot of money." Their answers ranged from "I don't know how much--just a lot" to "fifty or a hundred thousand a year" and "a couple of million if I can".

A majority of the students want to go to a large city like New York or Atlanta. Some of the nonurban students expressed a desire to go only as far as the nearest large city--50 to 60 miles from home. One small-city student wants to live abroad because her cousin has lived there. Typical of students in this age group, once this comment was made, other students stated their desire to live in foreign cities. However, the majority of students in urban, suburban, and rural focus groups named cities in the United States, often within their own state.

2. **What do you think you really will be doing when you are 25 years old?**

To try to separate students' fantasies from their true expectations for themselves, we asked them what they really expect to be doing at age 25. About half of them expect to be college graduates, independent and living on their own. The students who want to become doctors or lawyers expect to be completing medical or law school at age 25 and looking for a job. The remaining students either do not know what they will do or hope to be "doing good." In other words, their "fantasies" appear to match their true expectations for the future.

At this point, we began to feel that the students have little or no concept of reality. They do not see a connection between their abilities or interests and the achievement of their dreams for the future. For instance, in one rural focus group, a student stated that she wants to be a fashion designer. When asked if she could sew or draw, she immediately said, "No," and laughed. Others in the room also laughed, apparently not at her, but at our silly question. She did not see a connection, nor did the other students in the room.

Along the same lines, quite a few male students in each of the focus groups want to be professional athletes. The slim chance of achieving this goal, given their abilities and circumstances, is not obvious to them. Only a few of these students are currently involved in organized school or community-sponsored sports. Instead, they believe that their "street" ball activities are the ticket to stardom in professional athletics.

3. **What would you have to do, or have, to make your ideal future come true? How do you know that?**

Often, the first requirement mentioned by students was money. Money is needed to go to school to pursue their desired careers. Few students expressed

great concern about where the money would come from, stating that they would get the money from parents or from scholarships and loans. They did not have specific information about how much money would be needed, where parents would get the money, what scholarships are available, or how to obtain grants and loans. The few students who did have specific, practical information mentioned that they got their information from a knowledgeable adult--usually a relative who had attended college or an adult who had helped someone through the college application process. Few teachers or school counselors were identified by students as the sources of information.

> My parents told me that if I took care of the grades and lessons, they would take care of the money part. (Rural)
>
> My parents promised me if I did good in school, they would help me go to college. (Small-city)
>
> I might get a scholarship or a job to help. My mama said she won't have all the money. (Urban)
>
> There's lot of scholarships out there to go to school if you want. (Suburban)
>
> If you're good in sports, you can get a scholarship real easy. (Small-city)

Several students mentioned going into the military to get college money. A few students recalled seeing television advertisements sponsored by the United Negro College Fund using the words, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." When asked how much money would be needed for one student to attend the University of South Carolina for one school year (including tuition, books, room, and board) students in all districts offered widely varying amounts from $700 to $20,000.

To make their dreams come true, students also believe that they should stay in school, get good grades, not become involved in drugs, and, most

important, go to college. The students report they know this because parents and teachers continually tell them that they must "get that education."

> They get on you all the time, you know, stay in school...get them grades. (Rural)
>
> My mama be telling me all the time, "You got to go to college to be something." She don't let up. (Suburban)
>
> My brother tells me not to be like him...stay in school so I can get a real job. He tells me I can do it, but it's up to me. I have to really want it. (Rural)
>
> Friends can tell you to stay in school and to stay out of trouble. (Suburban)

At this point, we wanted to determine students' perceptions of the relationship between their future goals and the types of courses those goals require. When asked whether it matters what courses you get "good" grades in, approximately one-fourth of the students answered negatively. Other students were confused by the question. Most of them, in both rural and urban areas, only know that "good grades" are identified as important by parents, teachers, and other adults. From the reactions of these students, it appeared to us that the majority had given little thought to what subjects or course level these "good grades" should be earned in. They did not make a distinction between more or less demanding courses nor did they indicate that it is important to do well in courses related to one's career plans.

4. What kinds of things might prevent you from reaching your goals?

Students are aware of obstacles that might prevent their achievement. The kinds of obstacles that they identify include dropping out of school, getting involved with the "wrong crowd," getting pregnant, not getting good grades, and getting involved with drugs. However, we did sense a that-can't-happen-to-me attitude among the students. In some cases, their attitude is "even if these things happen to me, I can overcome." Following some of the focus-group

discussions, we learned from school counselors and principals that some of these same students are already parents or "in with the wrong crowd."

5. What does it mean to be successful?

Overwhelmingly, success for the majority of students was tied to economic security. Success consists of having the material comforts that students feel are necessary to be happy--a nice car, a house, the ability to buy lots of clothes, and the ability to travel. Other students equated success with freedom and autonomy--the ability to do what you want, when you want, and how you want.

> Success is doing what you like to do--what makes you happy. (Suburban)

6. Tell me about someone you know personally who is successful, someone around 25 years old or so, whom you look up to. What makes them successful?

This question was difficult for some students to answer and impossible for others. Especially in rural communities, it became obvious that these children did not know anyone who was "successful." These communities have few or no black businessmen, doctors, lawyers, scientists, or other professionals. The majority of the students referred to a relative who is working and out on their own. Students often mentioned members of their own families--a parent or a brother, as well as uncles, cousins, and in-laws. Often, they identified a person and indicated where he or she lives, but they were unsure of what the person does for a living.

> My brother--he travels a lot. He's in the army, and he's going to be a doctor. He tells me about it, what he does and stuff. (Suburban)

> My cousin's husband--they live in Virginia. I think he does something with computers. (Rural)

> My mother--I think she's successful. [Why?] Because she works. (Rural)

Approximately one-fourth of the students could not identify a familiar and admired person around 25 years of age. Even after being given time to think, some students still could not identify anyone.

When asked why they thought the persons they identified were successful, we once again picked up the themes of economic success and autonomy. A majority of the students said that these people are successful "because they make a lot of money," or "they have their own business."

In one suburban focus group, a student stated that she looks up to her mother because "she had raised a lot of kids by herself." This generated similar statements from other students.

> I look up to my father because he didn't finish school, but he has a good job now. (Rural)
>
> I look up to my mom because she's always there for me, and she wants me to be somebody. (Suburban)

Parent Responses

1. **Tell us about the ideal future you imagine for your child. Where would he/she live? What kind of job would he/she have?**

The majority of parents in the focus groups have nonspecific dreams for their children. Parents repeatedly spoke of just wanting their children to do well, to do their best, to do whatever they can to the best of their ability, or to do what makes them satisfied and happy. Most of them want their children to complete high school and go to college, preferably a four-year college. A few parents envision cosmetology school or technical college in their children's "ideal future." However, even when prodded, parents were reluctant to be more specific about the future they envision for their children. Even so, they were eager for us to know that they intend to be supportive of their children's dreams.

- Whatever she wants to do, I'm behind her. As long as she is doing the best she can, I'll be satisfied. (Rural)

  I just want him to be able to take care of himself, be happy, do his best. (Small-city)

  They know I'm behind them. (Urban)

2. **What would it take for your child to have the ideal future? What would they have to do or have? What would you have to do or have?**

Money for a "good education" was the first requirement for an "ideal future" that was identified by parents in all groups. Most feel that now is the time to start saving, but few have begun to do so. A few parents stated that one should start saving for college as soon as one's children are born. However, only a few--mostly parents from urban areas--had actually begun to save the money to send their children to college. The parents who had not yet begun to save for college said they would start soon and would "find the money somehow."

Parents also expressed hopes that their children would get scholarships or grants to attend college. However, they also indicated that they are prepared to take out a loan to pay for college if necessary. Quite a few parents also said that they expect their children to work and assist them in earning money for college and related expenses like books or meals.

> My daughter knows that she has to work to help me. I'm by myself, and I will need help. She is supposed to start work this summer if she can find any [work]. (Rural)

Besides money and a good education, the parents identified staying in school and graduating, making good grades, and staying out of trouble as necessary for obtaining the "ideal future." To help their children stay out of trouble and do well in school, the parents said that they provide encouragement, quality time, and guidance. They claimed that it is very important to praise children's good work and to punish poor performance.

I think it is important to let my son know I'm behind him all the way and I'm proud of what he does. (Small-city)

Only a few parents had more specific ideas about how to help their children achieve the ideal future. One mother, in a rural community, said she initiates formal and informal conferences or visits with her child's teachers, regardless of how her child is doing in school. She does not wait for PTA meetings or a summons from the school. Her daughter is aware of her mother's visits each time and has come to expect this. This surprised most of the other parents, and they appeared to listen carefully.

3. **What does success mean to you in terms of your child? What would prevent him or her from accomplishing his or her goals?**

Like the students, the parents defined success in terms of material wealth and personal autonomy. They expect their children to take care of themselves and want them to be able to do as they please. Quite a few parents expect their children to care for them in the future. Parents also hope that their children will be able to afford nice homes, cars, clothes, etc.

Parents were more specific about what might prevent their children from achieving their goals. Each of the parents involved in the focus groups either has an older child who dropped out of high school or college or knows an older child, often a relative, who dropped out. Because of their experiences with these young people, the parents are especially eager for their younger children to make good grades and stay in school. Parents with successful older children and relatives are hopeful for their younger children, but they are unsure of how to replicate this successful experience.

Many parents, especially in rural districts, depend on their hope and belief in God to ensure that their children will stay in school and graduate. A few others spoke almost fatalistically about why one child is successful and

another becomes pregnant and drops out. These parents attributed this behavior to inherent differences in the children, rather than to something that they could control or manage. They spoke about doing their best to encourage their children--telling them why school is important, enforcing discipline (with corporal punishment if necessary), making sure they do their homework, visiting the school when necessary...and trusting the rest to God.

> I feel like my son will finish school, and I pray that he will...but you never know. You do all you can and then you pray to the good Lord. So many things can happen nowadays. (Small-city)

> You talk to your kids, and you tell them about all the things that can happen. It's no use not talking to them and pretending some things don't exist, because they do. Talk to them about AIDS and sex and drugs...they see it anyway. Still it might happen, but you talk to them and be honest about it. (Suburban)

Ambivalence about "pushing" children was expressed by the parents we interviewed. Again, parents have either direct personal experience or indirect knowledge of children who have been "pushed too far." When asked about the effects of being pushed, parents talked about students' rebelling, making bad grades, talking back, leaving home, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and committing suicide. Even when some parents see signs of rebellion, they believe there is little to do about it except pray. Others concentrate on maintaining positive relationships with children.

> You can't push them, you know. That won't work. They'll just close down and stop eating...and you'll lose 'em. (Rural)

> My son in college now was telling us last week about this girl at his school who committed suicide because she had been accepted into another college and had wanted to go there. But her parents had made her go to that college, and she was so unhappy. You have to let kids do what they want to sometime but be there to support them or pick them up if they fail. We all pray to God about things like this. (Small-city)

A majority of the parents expressed their willingness to do whatever they can to prevent or deal with their children's problems. When asked to be more

specific, they said they would reduce privileges, be firm, pray, talk to their children, and "leave it to the Lord." No parents, even those who seemed to be more educated, mentioned interventions like individual or family counseling, school dropout prevention programs, and alternative schools. No one mentioned talking to the teacher or school counselor or taking advantage of other services offered through the schools. Even the more knowledgeable parents in the focus groups and those who work in the school systems did not mention these kinds of school alternatives and resources. We could not determine whether they were simply unaware of school services or unwilling to use them, either because of a belief in self-sufficiency or the view that the services are not worthwhile.

4. **What is a "good education" for your child? How much is good enough? Is that different from when you were in school? If so, why is it different?**

Parents generally agreed on the need for their children to earn both a high school diploma and a college degree. Based on their own employment experiences, parents in all groups agreed that the world is changing and that a college degree is increasingly necessary to get a good job and to "get by." They have seen farm, plant, and textile jobs disappear. Parents working in the textile mills or in processing plants in rural counties have directly experienced the effects of technological change. They said that they have pointed out to their children the impact of limited education on their own families.

> I tell my boy that he can't do like me. I work in the lab at the hospital, but I didn't finish school. I had to drop out and go to work, and this man gave me an opportunity to work where I am now. You can't do that now. I came along when people were willing to give you a break. (Small-city)

> Technology has changed so much now. We even have computers at each work station at my plant, and I had to learn on the job how to operate one.

Children today will be expected to know a lot of things before they are hired. They can't learn on the job like I did. (Suburban)

I got pregnant and didn't finish school. I went back later and finished high school, but it was hard, and I have to work two jobs to make ends meet. Maybe if I had gone to college, it would have been different. I tell my daughter this so hopefully she won't make the same mistake. (Suburban)

Parents in rural focus groups described their need to drop out of school to work in the fields or to get other jobs to help the family. They admitted that children today do not have to do this to the same degree.

A small number of parents offered the observation that sometimes in life "it's not what you know, but who you know." Parents said that they still tell their children to get an education and obtain knowledge, but they also tell them that it is important to know the "right people." They gave examples from their communities and from their own lives to support their claim that good contacts are important.

III. Opinions of Jobs and Careers

Rationale

Discussion questions in this section were intended to assess the students' and parents' views on various professions, including teaching, and to ascertain influences or motivations for students to enter certain professions. The declining number of minority graduates entering the teaching profession in the last five years makes it important to try to determine the perceptions of students and parents about teachers and the teaching profession.

Student Responses

1. **Do you want to be a mechanic, a farmer, or a mill or factory worker? Do you want to enter the military? Do you want to be a teacher, a lawyer, or some other kind of professional?**

None of the students we spoke with want to be farmers. They said that they would not work on a farm because it involves "dirty" work and takes a lot of time to do all the necessary chores. Another undesirable aspect of farming cited by the students is the need to live in the country, isolated from other people. Less than a handful of students indicated an interest in being a mechanic. This kind of work did not appeal to the majority of the students because mechanics get "greasy and dirty" when fixing cars.

> It's okay [being a mechanic] if you own your own place...if it's your own garage. (Rural)

> My uncle fixes cars and he makes a lot of money...but he had to work a lot...but I guess that's okay if that's what you want to do...but not me. (Suburban)

Employment in manufacturing plants, textile mills, and fast-food restaurants is typical in the communities from which the focus-group participants were drawn. However, the majority of the students overwhelmingly reject the idea of working in the plants and mills. Even though most of the students know adults who work in these jobs, they see plants and mills as

unattractive, with little or no future for advancement, a high risk of being laid-off, and low salaries. Students also cited the repetitiveness of the work, as well as the noise and dirt, as other undesirable features of this kind of work.

> I want a better job, a higher job. You know, something where you can do something different. That stuff in there [the mill], that's a low job. I don't want a low job like that. (Suburban)

> You have to come home with cotton in your hair, and you have to wear dirty clothes to work. (Rural)

A few students in each group said that it might be okay to work in these places to obtain money for immediate needs (a car or school tuition) or to work in an office or as a supervisor in one of the mills.

> My father works at Professional Medical Products as a supervisor. He's been there a long time and really likes it. I'd like to be like him. (Small-city)

A majority of the students were attracted to professional positions because they believe these jobs command good salaries, are interesting, allow autonomy, and provide opportunities to travel and to buy nice things. However, the majority of the students have little specific knowledge of what particular professions involve. Those students who are more knowledgeable typically have friends and relatives in business and other professions who have given them more specific information about the work they do.

As much as 10 percent of the students in each focus group have family members in the military and describe it as a good career choice. Students cited travel, good pay, and money for education as positive aspects of a military career. They also believe that people who go into the service learn a skill or a trade that can be used after military service.

Negatives include having to get up early, using a gun, being told what to do all the time, and risking the danger of combat. However, more students thought

of a military career positively than negatively. The thought of being in the military had occurred to about half of the students we interviewed.

> I have a cousin who lives in Germany. He likes it, and he gets to travel. I want to be able to do that, too. (Small-city)

> I thought about being in the army a lot one time....Then I changed my mind because I couldn't have people telling me what to do all the time. (Rural)

> Going in service is okay, and you can get money to go to college...and you can learn a skill like computers so you can get a job when you get out....That's what they say on TV. (Suburban)

When asked whether they would consider a career in education, the students' immediate responses were negative. The majority of students laughed or shook their heads vigorously. Fewer than five students expressed an interest in teaching, and these students did so because of admiration for a special teacher or interest in a favorite subject. The majority of the students expressed distaste for the profession because of low pay, a lot of extra work, few rewards, and the requirement to be in school all the time with angry, disruptive, and "bad" children.

> You have to be around all these bad kids, you know...the ones fighting and hitting on people. Teachers don't get respect. I wouldn't be around them....You got to be yelling all the time. (Rural)

> You don't make enough money to be a teacher for what a teacher have [sic] to do. (Rural)

> Teachers have too much work to do. They have to grade papers when they get home. I want a job I don't have to work at when I leave every day. (Rural)

According to the students in the focus groups, their peers fight, become rowdy and noisy, refuse to obey the teacher, and talk back. All of the students could give specific examples of how they or their peers "get on the teacher's nerves." A few of the students admitted to being among the disrespectful students, but they could not explain their misbehavior.

In general, teachers are seen as being continually under siege by out-of-control students who do not care about school and give everyone a hard time. A majority of the students in the urban discussion groups said that they have no strong desire to attend school. They claimed to go to school only to be with their friends.

When asked if they would consider teaching as a temporary profession, a few students in several of the groups were interested. These students thought that they might teach for a while in order to study and save money, perhaps to go back to college.

2. **What do people think about others who are farmers, mechanics, textile workers, nurses, teachers, doctors, or lawyers?**

Students stated that mechanics, farmers, and textile workers are looked down upon by most of society. They said that people do not think much of people in these positions because their work involves low pay, dirty working conditions, and a lack of job security. Students agreed that these are necessary professions and that someone has to do these things, but they were clear about their desire not to do these jobs.

Doctors and lawyers are admired by students in all of the focus groups. Their perception is that these professionals make lots of money, live in nice houses, drive nice cars, and travel. Nurses are perceived as "helpers" who are very much needed in society. Five female students expressed some interest in a nursing career.

The students believe that teachers teach because of some personal interest, but they could not imagine why anyone would want to work in the schools. They described hard-working and dedicated teachers, and they admitted that teachers are needed to teach future generations. However, an overwhelming majority have no desire to become educators.

Parent Responses

1. **Do you want your child to be a mechanic, a farmer, or a mill or factory worker? Do you want them to enter the military? Become a teacher, lawyer or other professional?**

In response to these questions, the parents involved in the focus group discussions were quick to state that they would support any career choice that their children might make in the future. Even so, it became clear to us that parents only truly approve of professional positions because they perceive that such jobs offer stability, opportunities for advancement, and better pay. Like their children, parents in each of the focus groups expressed negative opinions about many blue-collar, manual-labor jobs. However, they disapproved of these occupations for reasons different from the students'. Most of the parents have seen textile and agricultural jobs disappear during their lifetimes. Many of them, particularly those in rural communities, have personally experienced the effects of plant closings, farm mechanization, and mill layoffs. They are also keenly aware of the physical demands of low-paying jobs and the poor prospects for advancement and better pay. Similar opinions were expressed by parents from urban areas as well.

> You just can't count on [mill or plant work] these days. If you do get work there, you can turn around next week and be laid off. (Rural)

> That's where I'm working now, and I know I don't want my child doing this work. I've been trying to get out of that mill all my life. (Small-city)

Several parents commented, some sarcastically, that they would make no objections if their children took jobs in a plant or mill. They were sure the difficult, tiring, and repetitive work would teach its own lesson.

A minority of the parents felt that a blue-collar occupation was a choice they would support. These parents felt that such a job would be worthwhile <u>if</u>

the child had completed high school and was determined to go to work immediately to earn money.

The parents expressed mixed feelings about their children's pursuing careers in teaching or education. In all of the groups, a majority did not want their children to become teachers. Like the students, these parents said that teachers are not sufficiently paid, have few opportunities for advancement, and are forced to cope with uninterested, aggressive students. The parents also blamed other parents for failing to support teachers and refusing to discipline their children or demand obedience to school rules. So, even though the parents agreed that teaching is a very important occupation with tremendous influence on the future, they still do not want their children to become teachers.

> I would want her to do something else. I just don't believe they pay teachers for what they have to put up with. (Rural)

> My child doesn't have the patience to teach these children. And there are other things he could get into these days that pay better. (Small-city)

> You can't lay a hand on those children. Their parents come to the school and argue with the teacher. They don't believe the child has done a thing wrong. (Rural)

Only a small group of parents in each group believes that education is a reasonable career choice for their children. They feel that teachers have a chance to continue to learn and advance their own education. They are also aware that teacher salaries are increasing and that teaching offers a fair degree of job security.

> It would be all right with me. Teachers can get on with their education and get a higher degree. (Rural)

> A teacher can pursue her own interests. They can go on and keep learning. They can go back to college for more education. (Small-city)

> A teacher can get paid more today. The salaries are going up--getting better than they used to be. (Small-city)

2. **What do people think of people in these jobs. Have you seen advertising attracting young people into these occupations?**

The majority of parents in every community reported that teaching is perceived as a valuable job that makes important contributions to the community, but they also acknowledged that education is not as respected as it once was.

> I don't know why. Seems like people don't look to teachers like they used to. Back when I was in school, everybody respected the teachers. (Rural)

These parents believe that educated black adults now have many opportunities beyond "preaching and teaching." No significant opinions on other occupations, beyond the assertion that blacks in any profession or business field create positive role models for the entire community, were offered.

The parents did recall recruitment advertising for the military services, cosmetology schools, and careers in education. But even though most believe that minority teachers are sought after, parents claimed to have little evidence that the state is concerned about attracting black students into education.

IV. School Performance and Preparation for College

Rationale

The questions in this section were asked to determine how well students and parents understand the educational system and the significance of test scores and ability grouping. We were also interested in gauging students' perceptions of the link between present choices and school performance and their aspirations for the future.

Student Responses

1. **How are you doing in school now? Are you doing the best that you can do? If not, why aren't you performing to the best of your ability?**

A majority of the students were understandably reluctant to confess poor performance in school and told us that they are doing "okay," "about average," or "all right" in school. Mathematics was the course in which students most often reported that they were not doing well. In the urban focus groups, the students readily described failing classes, being suspended for disciplinary reasons, or "getting into trouble." Two students in one urban focus group claimed that they will soon be sent to a Youth Service's facility. Other students were more reluctant to admit to poor school performance. Only a few students in the rural focus groups admitted that they are failing one or more courses. The majority of the students finished the summary of their progress with "but I could do better."

Approximately three-fourths of the students admitted that they are not performing to the best of their ability in school. The remaining students stated that they are doing their best, making As and Bs in their courses. The students who indicated that they are not performing at their best were very specific about what prevents them from doing their best. Their explanations

include inattention in class, inadequate preparation for class, not doing homework, and disciplinary infractions.

> Well, a lot of people got a bad attitude, you know, and they are all the time getting mad and fighting and that stuff. And you know, I understand that 'cause I got a bad attitude. I don't like people to be messing with me, and then I get in a fight and have to go to in-school suspension. (Rural)

> I like to talk on the phone a lot. I know if I quit talking on the phone so much, I would get better grades. (Rural)

> When the teacher is talking, sometimes I'm writing notes to my friends...and sometimes we get caught passing 'em...that's embarrassing. (Small-city)

> I know I could do better. [Why don't you do better?] Because nobody makes me. [Who could make you?] My mother. (Rural)

> When my mother asks me if I have homework to do, I tell her that I don't have any or that I did it already...but I do [have homework]. Then she lets me watch TV. (Suburban)

2. **What do your parents expect from you now? What do your parents expect from you in ten or fifteen years? How do you know?**

According to the students, their parents expect them to stay in school, to stay out of trouble, and to get good grades. They claimed to know this because their parents tell them or they "pick it up." Students in every group indicated that they know good grades are important to their parents by the way their parents react when they bring home "bad" grades. Only about one-fourth of the students indicated that their parents had explicitly told them what was expected of them.

> You just sort of know what your folks want....You can tell, you know....It's hard to explain. (Small-city)

For some students, failure to meet parental expectations, whether or not these expectations were expressly stated, has brought spankings or beatings. Some students admitted that they do not bring home report cards with bad

grades. They only show papers with good grades to their parents, and they throw away notes from teachers about misbehavior.

> Last time I brought that [report card] to my house and I got Cs and Ds, my mama [spanked me]. So I signed that last one myself, and she didn't ask me nothing about it. (Rural)

Thinking about the next ten or fifteen years, students in all of the focus groups believe that their parents expect them to graduate from high school and college, get a good job, and become independent. A few of the female students mentioned the additional expectation of getting married and raising a family. The students did not dwell on what their parents wanted in ten or fifteen years. It is our observation that the present is of more immediate concern to these children.

3. **Have you ever heard of ability grouping or tracking? Do you know how it works and how it affects you? What track are you in? Does it matter what track you are in?**

Few students understood the term "tracking" and could describe how it works. With some additional prompting from us, more students began to understand what we were asking them about. Students in every focus group described tracking as having something to do with a test, that determines the courses they take in school. Students in every discussion group reported that teachers and school counselors tell them it is important to do well on these tests, but they are not sure why it is important to do well on them.

> I know that after you take that test, you have to take certain courses...but I guess I did pretty good...nobody said. (Small-city)

All of the students have heard of college-preparatory courses. Most of them know that if they want to go to college, they should take these courses. However, only about one-half of the students who knew that college preparatory courses are needed for college also knew whether they were enrolled in such classes. Other students claimed that it does not matter whether they take

college-preparatory courses. According to these students, someone making As and Bs in general or basic courses is "doing okay" and can be accepted into college.

> I'm taking the basic stuff now, and I guess I'll take basic classes when I get to high school. [What will you take in college?] I guess I'll keep on with the basic courses. (Rural)

Asked when someone thinking of going to college should start to take college-preparatory courses, about half of the students said that it is okay to wait until the junior or senior year in high school before taking "hard" courses. This perception was held by students from every community.

4. **If you had a choice, would you rather take an easy course and get an A or a hard course and make a C? What would your parents want?**

There was some difference of opinion on this issue in each of the focus groups. Many would rather take easy courses and get As, but some said that they are willing to take more difficult courses and get Cs. However, it should be noted that students appeared to us to be greatly influenced by their peers. If the first respondents preferred the hard C, others said the same.

When asked their reasons for taking more difficult courses, students said that they would learn more. Only a few in each group anticipate being exposed to more information that would help them to do well either on the standardized tests or in college.

The students also were divided in their perceptions of parents' preferences. Some claimed that parents only care about their final grades, while others reported that their parents would want them to try harder and do their best in a more challenging course, even if their grades were not as good.

> My parents would definitely want me to take a hard course and get a C. They wouldn't care as long as I did my best. Hard courses are better for you because they prepare you more. (Small-city)

I would rather take an easy course and get an A. They [parents] don't care as long as it's an A. (Rural)

5. What do you have to do to graduate from high school now?

Collectively, students could identify most of the requirements for high school graduation in South Carolina. However, very few individual students could name all of the requirements. The students know that a certain number of units are needed for graduation, but they are confused about the number and type of courses required. They are aware that they must pass some kind of test (the state "exit exam") to receive a diploma, but they do not understand the consequences of failing the test. Also, the test is frequently confused with the SAT and PSAT. Students are unsure about which tests are used for what purposes.

I know you have to take that test...the exit test. [What happens if you don't pass the test?] You get a G.E.D. (Small-city)

If you pass all your classes and don't pass this test, they still will let you graduate...but you have to come back and take this test. (Rural)

6. Does your overall performance in school today affect your future?

Students have some limited understanding of the connections between current school activities, their behavior in school, and future success. A majority of the students we talked with clearly believe that these things matter. They stated that attitude and discipline records might keep them from going to college or getting a job.

When you get ready to get a job, they look to see if you were out of school a lot...because that might mean you won't come to work a lot. (Small-city)

If you have bad records in school, you might not get to go to college....So you need to have a good record at school. (Rural)

If you're bad in school, people think you're bad all the time, and you might not get a job. (Rural)

Only a few students denied that employers check school records. These students stated that the main effects of current school problems would be the formation of "bad habits" or involvement with "bad" friends or drugs.

Students in the urban focus groups appeared to us to be the most uninformed and unconcerned about connections between schoolwork, courses completed, and college acceptance. Many of them seemed puzzled by questions about the types of courses they were taking and did not appear to understand the link between school coursework and future chances of college admission.

Parent Responses

1. How are your children doing in school? How do you know?

A majority of the parents feel that their children are performing acceptably in most of their subjects. Even so, they did allow that their children have room for improvement in one or two classes, usually mathematics and English. Some parents stated that they always receive the good reports. They know that their children often withhold bad reports or grades. While the majority of the parents reported keeping up with their children's progress through report cards and interim reports, they are not sure when or how often these reports are issued.

> I think my daughter is doing okay. She says she is. I haven't seen a report card yet. Every time I ask her she says she left it in her locker...but she says she is doing okay. (Small-city)

Even though the parents told us that they are well informed, their responses led us to believe that they are not as well informed as they think. For example, one mother said that she is well aware of her daughter's progress in school and regularly receives interim reports and report cards. However, when asked what courses her daughter is taking and what grades she is making, she could not provide us with specific answers. Based on our observations of

these parents, we believe they, like many others, want to be informed. However, perhaps because of work hours, lack of knowledge about the educational system, and so forth, they do not keep abreast of their children's progress in school.

A few parents in each group told us of their concerted efforts to stay apprised of their children's progress. They said that they do not wait for report cards or interim reports. They frequently initiate contact with their children's teachers and make a practice of checking homework and reviewing all test papers and grades.

> I make it my business to know how my daughter is doing in school. I go to the school when I get ready, or I call her teachers to see how she is doing. I also tell them to call me if she is not doing good or causes trouble. She knows this, too. (Rural)

2. **Who is responsible for a child's performance in school?**

The parents indicated that teachers, administrators, parents, and students all have responsibility for a student's educational success. The parents believe that they have a responsibility to prepare their children physically for school--getting them out of bed, fed, dressed, and sent or taken to school with the necessary materials. They said that parents also have an obligation to monitor their children's progress and to make changes or modifications through discipline, reinforcement, reminders, and incentives. The parents indicated that teachers and administrators have the obligation to be fair to their children and to do everything that they can to help their children learn. However, all of the parents agreed that their children have the ultimate responsibility for learning.

> I'm going to do my part, and I will make sure that the teachers do theirs. But my son has the last say. We can't make him learn. He has to want to. (Suburban)

Like the old saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water...." That's the way it is with children. In spite of all we do, sometimes things just go wrong. (Rural)

3. **What is ability grouping or tracking? How does it work, and how does it affect your child? What group is your child in? Does it matter what group your child is in?**

Very few parents clearly understand tracking and its effects on their children. Like the students, the parents are aware that the school offers both college-preparatory and general courses. However, the majority of them are unsure about how students are placed in one track versus another. They are equally unaware of the significance of being placed in a general or basic track, as opposed to the college-preparatory or academic track. Fewer than one-fourth of the parents know what ability group their child is in. About half of them are unsure, while the rest simply do not know. Even so, all of the parents stated that the ability group in which their child is enrolled is important.

Parents in every community know that students are placed in ability groups by test scores, but they frequently cannot name the test or understand how test scores are interpreted. More importantly, the parents are unsure of their options if they do not agree with the school's placement of their children. We asked them what they would do if they thought their child should be in a higher-level course than the teachers and administrators recommended. About half of the parents said that they would defer to the school's judgment.

I think that if I disagreed with what the school said, I guess I would have to go along with the school...the teachers and all...I mean, that's what they're there for. They're suppose to know best. (Small-city)

A few parents in each group stated that they would challenge the school's recommendation. Those who said this were often college-educated (self-identified) or had a good source of information about how to move a child into

another course. Other parents listened with interest as these parents spoke of visiting the school and effectively challenging a child's assignment to a lower-ability course.

> When we moved here, they put my daughter in a Chapter 1 class. She didn't belong there. She was shy and wouldn't talk. It took me two days off from work, but I got her moved. I had to go to the school and fight with them about it. (Urban)

At least one parent in almost every discussion group had attempted to do the opposite--move a student from a college-preparatory class to a basic or general class. Though the number was small, several parents justified this action on the grounds that they did not want to push their children too much.

> I tried to get my daughter moved into a lower class, but the teacher she had told me that she thought my daughter could work in a higher class. I didn't know what to do because I didn't want to push her too much. I let her stay in there because of what the teacher said, and it turned out all right. She did good. Then I was glad I let her stay. (Rural)

4. Would you rather have your child in a hard class and make a C or in an easy class and make an A?

Almost unanimously, parents wanted their children to be in a hard class and make a C. Parents stated that their children would learn more in hard classes and be exposed to more challenging work.

> My child would probably want to be in an easy class, but I would want her in the harder class. (Rural)

> Without a doubt, I would want my son to be in the harder class. I think that's what he would say also. I've drilled that in his head enough. (Small-city)

The expectations that the parents shared with us differ significantly from the students' perceptions of parental expectations. Most students claimed that their parents would want them to bring home an A, no matter what.

5. What does your child have to do to graduate now?

The parents know that a specified number of credits are required for high school graduation, but they are unsure of the exact number and type of courses

- required. In addition, many of the parents do not appear to understand that the courses that are acceptable for high school credit are not necessarily adequate for college admission or to prepare students to do college work. Collectively, groups of parents were able to describe the courses and tests required for college admission, but few individual parents in any focus group know what is needed.

V. The Importance of Black Teachers

Rationale

The ultimate goal of the project for which this focus group work was conducted is to increase the number of minority students who go to college and subsequently pursue careers in education. Questions in this section were asked to get a handle on students' and parents' views about the teaching profession and to further explore students' interest in an education career.

Student Responses

1. **How many black teachers do you have who actually teach you every day [not including teacher aides, administrators, librarians, school counselors, janitors, kitchen staff, etc.]? How many black teachers are there in your entire school [including school counselors, administrators, etc.]? What positions do black teachers hold in your school?**

Approximately three-quarters of the students have one or no black teachers. The others have two or more black teachers. Only the students in the urban focus groups have more than three black teachers. There are no more than 12 black teachers at any of the schools, but the average number at each school ranges from 6 to 10. School faculty sizes range from 25 to 45.

About half of the students volunteered that the black teachers in their schools teach remedial or basic track courses--in particular, remedial reading, math lab, and study hall. At all of the schools in which the focus groups met, there is at least one minority school counselor or administrator.

2. **Is the number of black teachers smaller or larger since you have been in school? Is the number of black teachers smaller or larger than when your parents were in school? In both cases, why do you think the number is smaller or larger?**

We were impressed by students' perceptions of the declining number of black people in education. A large majority of students in each group estimated that the current number of black teachers is smaller than when they

first started school seven or eight years ago. They are also under the impression that the number is smaller than when their parents were in school.

Students in every location suggested that there are fewer black teachers due to teacher retirement, low salaries in education, better and more opportunities for educated black people, high dropout rates of black students, and a lack of money or grants to pay for college. They also cited the effects of disrespectful, disruptive, and even violent students as a major cause of the decline in the number of black teachers.

> Nobody want to be a teacher 'cause you have to put up with bad kids all the time. (Rural)
>
> There is not enough money to be a teacher for what you have to put up with. [Educated black people] can make more money doing something else and you don't have to put up with kids. (Rural)

3. Is it important to have black teachers? What is good about having a black teacher?

According to students in all of the focus groups, black teachers teach them more, expect more of them, and push them harder to be successful. These students reported that their black teachers are good role models, and--most important--they are more understanding of black students than white teachers are. The students were quick to say that they do have caring white teachers. Still, they believe that they have learned more from black teachers, and, therefore, some prefer to have black teachers. Students also indicated that black teachers are more fair to black students and care more about black students personally. Only about 5 percent of the students we spoke to do not see any advantage in having a black teacher.

> Black teachers were just like us once. They know what it's like. They've been there, and they can help you. (Suburban)
>
> You can tell a black teacher your secrets. (Small-city)

When you have problems, you can tell a black teacher, and they can understand what you're talking about. (Rural)

Most white teachers act like they're scared of black kids. (Rural)

More than students in nonurban focus groups, those in the urban focus groups initially expressed feelings of hostility toward black teachers. They volunteered fewer positive school experiences in general and more problems with teachers of all races. According to these urban students, teachers are often arbitrary and unresponsive.

My teacher gets in my face all the time. She makes me mad, telling me what to do. (Urban)

Although they also have good teachers who are friendly and helpful, students in the urban focus groups did not tell us about these teachers as readily as did students in the other focus groups.

4. Would you become a teacher, a counselor, a principal, etc.? Would you consider being in education if you didn't have to stay in it until you retire? What would make you decide to be a teacher? Has anybody ever talked to you about being a teacher?

In answering the first of these questions, about half of the students distinguished between ability and desire. These students expressed confidence that they have the ability to be educators, but they have no desire to be. Less than one-fourth of the students indicated that they "might" think about pursuing a career in education.

I don't want to be a teacher because I don't want to work hard all day at a job I don't really enjoy. (Suburban)

Nothing could make me be a teacher. I'm tired of school. Once I get out, I don't want to come back for any reason. (Rural)

If you're a teacher, you got to be with bad kids all day. I'd probably hit 'em if they wouldn't shut up. (Urban)

As we mentioned earlier, a majority of the students in every focus group are opposed to the idea of teaching. Nevertheless, when we asked if they would

consider short-term careers in education, approximately one-fourth of the students replied that they might consider teaching--provided that they have "good" students, few discipline problems, and an obligation to teach only for a short period of time.

> Yes, I think I could teach for a while. My science teacher is doing that. She's teaching science while she's trying to get into medical school. I think that's a good idea. (Rural)

Students in every community reported being steered away from teaching by a teacher. They also cited teachers' comments about the frustrations they experience on the job.

> My teacher told us she don't get paid enough to be a baby-sitter for us. She said anybody who would be a teacher must be crazy. (Urban)

When asked what would make them more seriously consider teaching, an overwhelming majority of students said "more money." Students in every focus group indicated that if teachers made more money, they would be more satisfied and could put up with "bad" kids. The students also observed that teachers are overworked and tired and that a lighter teacher work load would make the profession more attractive to them.

Only about 5 percent of the students indicated that anyone has talked to them about becoming a teacher. In most cases, a special teacher or a parent had raised the issue. Parental or teacher support seemed to be important to those students who had expressed interest in a teaching career. However, there were other students in the focus groups who said they had been approached about teaching, but who still planned to pursue careers outside of education.

5. What should be done about the shortage of black teachers and who should be doing something about it?

Echoing ideas expressed elsewhere in this summary of the focus group discussions, the students suggested that black students might be persuaded to

enter teaching if they were offered more money for the job and if students could be made to behave better in class.

> I would be a teacher, if there was more money in teaching. I think a lot of people would too. (Suburban)

Some of them replied that students themselves could help to alleviate the minority teacher shortage by thinking about a career in teaching and by talking to friends about the possibility of a career in education.

When asked what the community could do to solve the minority teacher shortage, the students suggested having speakers at church to talk about going to college, recruiting through existing or retired black teachers, going on field trips to colleges, starting a college just for black teachers, and providing scholarships through local churches and other organizations--like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, sororities and fraternities, or the United Negro College Fund.

> [The community] could give us money to go to school to become a teacher. (Rural)

> There could be a college just for black kids to be teachers. (Small-city)

Parent Responses

1. **Do you notice fewer or more black teachers in schools today? Are there more or less of them than when you were in school, or since your children started school?**

A substantial majority of parents in every group have noticed a continuing decline in the number of black teachers. Some of the older parents were educated in segregated schools, when all of their teachers were black.

The parents are aware that their children are taught by some black teachers. Most of them know how many black teachers there are in their children's schools. Some of them even know their children's black teachers personally.

When we were in school, all our teachers were black. It's definitely gone down since then. (Rural)

I know my child's teachers--the black teachers. We know them here in [our town]. (Small-city)

Only a very few parents estimated that the number of black teachers is increasing since the beginning of their or their children's school days.

2. **Is it important for your child to have black teachers? What is good about having black teachers?**

Again, in responses to these questions, all parents responded similarly to the students. According to the parents, both white and black teachers are caring and helpful, and both can work effectively with children. The special value of a black teacher, however, is the example he or she sets for black students, as well as his or her sensitivity to and understanding of minority children.

When distinctions were drawn between black and white teachers, some parents suggested black teachers may be more demanding of minority children. They may push them harder and have higher expectations of black children than white teachers do. However, parents in every community reported that their children have white teachers who are equally as demanding and motivated to help black children as are their black teachers.

It's good [to have minority teachers], because it shows our kids what can be achieved. (Suburban)

Black teachers give black children someone they can identify with and look up to. We need some more. (Rural)

More than parents in the nonurban focus groups, parents in the urban focus groups expressed dissatisfaction with schools and teachers--black and white. According to many of these urban parents, teachers label their children because they live in low-income housing and are on welfare. They accused these teachers of spending little time with their children, tracking them into "low"

classes, and exerting minimal efforts to help them learn. When making these criticisms, parents rarely distinguished the race of the teachers in question. Rather, they categorized teachers on the basis of their effectiveness, fairness, and apparent motivation.

> We don't need any more teachers like the ones we have now. Black or white --they don't do anything they don't have to do with my child. (Urban)

Some parents also expressed concern about the effects of teacher certification tests, like the National Teachers Exam and the Education Entrance Exam, on the supply of minority teachers. Several of the parents know teachers who have left education either as a result of their anxieties about taking these tests or because they were not able to pass them.

3. Why are there fewer black teachers today? Why has there been a decline?

The parents we spoke to cited many of the same reasons that their children identified to explain the declining number of black teachers. However, unlike the students, none of the parents attributed the current shortage to negative characteristics or behaviors on the part of black people themselves. A majority of parents in all communities shared the belief that retirement, low pay, opportunities in other occupations, and the stress of working with disrespectful and disruptive students account for the decline in the number of black teachers.

> There's nothing in teaching nowadays. You can make more doing something else and go further, too. (Small-city)

> Nobody wants to be in the schools with these kids bringing guns and acting smart. I don't blame 'em. (Urban)

Parents in the urban discussion groups mentioned "having to work with bad kids" most frequently. They felt that the presence of these children in schools drives good teachers of both races out of the profession. They want disruptive children removed from the schools.

4. **What can be done about the decline in the number of black teachers? Who should be doing something?**

When asked who could address this problem, the parents eventually acknowledged that they could make a contribution. They suggested that they could talk to their own children about teaching.

> We could do something, we could talk to kids, let them know we think it's a good thing. (Rural)

Even so, the parents said that they are reluctant to encourage their children to pursue a teaching career unless the child expresses some interest first. If a student is interested, the parents feel that their support and approval is very important to keep that interest alive.

The parents also suggested that the schools could reestablish future teacher clubs, improve teacher salaries, and inform black children of the valuable role of teachers. Several fathers suggested creating more opportunities for black teachers to be promoted. They believe that advancement into administration will keep black teachers in education.

Several parents recommended that community groups approach school board members and elected officials to stress the importance of minority teacher recruitment. Other parents suggested asking retired teachers, often well-known and respected in the community, to act as resource persons for students.

VI. Recommendations for Project Development

Recommendation 1:

> **Assemble and work with a local task force or group of representatives from key minority organizations, especially those with education committees, or individuals concerned about education. Know and work through the unique structure present in each community.**

Fraternities, sororities, and groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Council of Negro Women, and the National Urban League frequently have organized local education committees that can be enlisted to address the minority teacher shortage in individual communities. However, keep in mind that no single organization in a community can be expected to have the resources to accomplish the many tasks necessary to help black students succeed academically and professionally. Therefore, a coalition or task force composed of members of these organizations may be most appropriate for addressing the issues raised in this report.

Minority students and their parents have a variety of needs. Each community's capacity for meeting those needs will differ. Before initiating activities, organizers should identify interested groups and individuals with appropriate kinds of expertise and involve them from the beginning in plans to meet the needs of minority parents and middle-school students. No two communities are alike, and consideration of the singular nature of each will contribute to the success of projects undertaken in that local area.

Jawanza Kunjufu has written several books that we feel are accessible and informative resources for adults working with minority children. We especially recommend Motivating and Preparing Black Youth to Work and To Be Popular or Smart: The Black Peer Group. Interested persons may want to share these books with the members of their organization or local task force. They may be

ordered by calling (800) 552-1991 or writing to African American Images, 9204 Commercial Avenue, Suite 308, Chicago, IL 60617.

Recommendation 2:

Use all possible methods to communicate with parents and families about the availability of assistance to help children achieve success in school, make appropriate career choices, and enroll and do well in college.

The means of communication typically used by schools may not be adequate to reach minority families. Every imaginable way to place information in homes should be considered and used. For example, fliers informing parents of workshops or information meetings to be held at a church or community center can be distributed at locations where people congregate (i.e., shopping centers, stores, barber shops, beauty salons, laundromats, doctors' offices, churches, and community centers). Simply posting notices at the host facility or sending them home with students is not always effective.

Each community has a unique "informal" information network that functions to keep people informed. Community groups should be encouraged to identify and take advantage of informal, as well as formal, ways to make families aware of available assistance.

Recommendation 3:

Organize parent support groups to provide parents with the opportunity to talk about problems with their children and share solutions.

When asked to make suggestions for activities that could help them to help their children, several parents noted that simply meeting and talking among themselves was useful. These parents said that the focus group experience provided them with a much-needed opportunity to unburden themselves in the company of others who share similar dilemmas and to listen as their peers offered ideas about successful strategies. Some parents were able to share techniques that have been effective with their own children. This kind of

sharing can build parental support, self-confidence, and community cohesiveness.

Adolescence can be exasperating. Parents participating in the focus groups expressed appreciation for the time to talk and listen to others who are raising young teenagers. Many parents are raising children alone or in disrupted households where adults are working in more than one job. We forget sometimes that parental isolation can be especially painful in rural or isolated school districts with limited or no transportation.

Recommendation 4:

Provide parenting skills assistance to help parents deal effectively with behavior problems, as well as the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and school failure.

Parents fear the influence of "the wrong friends" on their children. Their concern about drug use, teen pregnancy, and school failure was palpable when these dangers were discussed in the focus groups. A few parents with at least one motivated and successful child wondered about the reasons for that child's success and expressed frustration at their inability to replicate it with other children in the family. Parents are unsure about when and how to "crack down" with greater discipline or when to relax their demands and allow their children to set their own goals and pursue them without constant monitoring or nagging.

Minority parents are not alone in these concerns. Parents in every ethnic and racial group are worried about their children's futures. But minority parents face especially troubling problems. Many black children lack a healthy self-image, a sense of personal identity, pride in themselves and their people, and the feeling that they are entitled to succeed academically and intellectually. The research and writings of Jawanza Kunjufu (1983, 1986,

1988), Signithia Fordham (1988; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986), and John Ogbu (1974, 1978, 1987) contain many important insights about the images that black children have of themselves and about the type and level of success they feel permitted to achieve. This research helps to explain why many of the capable children who participated in the focus groups continue to do poorly in school despite the demands, support, and prayers of parents and teachers.

Some parents may not feel comfortable discussing the effects of racial stereotypes and racism on one's self-image with their children. However, Kunjufu and others believe that these conversations are critical if students are to get past the limiting influence of peer-group pressure. Communication about these issues may stimulate major changes in the expectations that black children are willing to accept from others and set for themselves.

Another skill to share with parents in a workshop setting is career planning. Many of the parents we spoke to do not discuss future careers with their children--especially in terms of that children's interests and abilities. Parents can be assisted in thinking about their children's career preferences and talents and talking about them with children. A realistic discussion of career interests can then lead to conversations about school performance and selection of courses that will enable the child to reach the goals he or she has envisioned.

Recommendation 5:

> **Conduct workshops for parents to help them become more knowledgeable about testing, tracking, high school graduation requirements, college entrance requirements, and financial aid.**

The minority parents with whom we spoke are interested in helping their children achieve a better life. Their personal experiences and familiarity with the "working world" make them keenly aware of the necessity for their

children to be better educated than they are and to be capable of competing for jobs in an increasingly technological world. But even though these parents understand the need for more education, their lack of information about testing and other school processes makes it difficult for them to take a leadership role in their children's education.

Much information about school requirements and education policy is misunderstood or understood only at a superficial level by parents and students alike. Some parents make assumptions based on the way things were when they were in school. Even when school personnel encourage questions, parents may be embarrassed to admit to a lack of knowledge. In our estimation, parents need additional, specific information about the following:

- Standardized tests - When are they administered, and how are test scores used by the schools?
- Tracking - How are decisions about ability grouping made? Who makes these decisions? What can parents do to question or request a change in assignment for their children?
- Parent-teacher conferences - How can parents use meetings with their children's teachers most effectively? What questions should parents be prepared to ask about their children's progress in class? What can parents do to monitor their children's work?
- State or district requirements for high school graduation - What courses should students take to make passage of "exit exams" easier, and what are the consequences of not passing these exams?
- Career planning - What school and/or community resources are available to help parents and students explore different careers and how to prepare for them?
- Requirements for college admission - What subjects and what level of subjects should students take in order to be admitted to state colleges and universities and to the historically black private colleges and universities in the state?
- Financial aid - When should parents start to plan financially for their children's college education? How does one complete the appropriate forms? When should parents submit financial aid applications and to whom?

In the case of many of the activities suggested above, role-playing activities may be used to lead parents through unfamiliar situations, such as meetings with a school counselor to request a course change or with college admissions personnel to talk about the suitability of an institution for a particular child. Role playing can help parents reduce their own anxieties about these situations by enabling them to confront their fears or anticipated embarrassments beforehand.

Recommendation 6:

> **Provide parents with accurate information regarding the salaries, responsibilities, opportunities for advancement, and varied options in education careers.**

Students may be acquiring some part of their negative attitudes toward teaching from parents. The poor opinions of teaching that were expressed by many of the parents to whom we spoke concerned the salary and working conditions that they believe teachers experience. But the information parents possess about teaching may be inaccurate or out-of-date. Reform efforts in many states have altered much in education. Salaries have increased; career ladders and merit pay are now present in many districts. Opportunities in administration, mentoring, and supervision are becoming available. Many parents might be surprised by the starting salaries available for teachers, as well as the increases that are now possible after additional experience and academic training. Parents need to have appropriate information regarding the status of teaching in their state and local district. This information may help alter their opinion of teaching as a career for their children.

The presence or absence of black teachers matters greatly to parents. They attribute positive influences on their children to their exposure to good minority role models in the schools. If the recruitment of minority educators

is presented to parents in terms of an improved effect on children, they may be influenced to speak more favorably to their own children regarding careers in this field.

Recommendation 7:

Collect and distribute information regarding state, local, and school policies, requirements, and common practices affecting academic success and opportunities for college enrollment.

Helping minority students and their families successfully negotiate the route to college requires extensive information regarding the regulations, policies, and practices applied in each state, district, and school. These can range from an individual school's usual activities regarding academic guidance and course selection at the middle-school level to admission requirements at state colleges or the nature and use of standardized tests. Assembling this information--perhaps in the form of an accessible "briefing package"--may take time, but it is a critical step that cannot be neglected if minority parents and students are to make informed choices.

Recommendation 8:

Provide opportunities for cultural enrichment to enhance the personal and social development of minority students.

We believe that minority students need exposure to a variety of experiences to become well-rounded, confident individuals who will pursue specific personal and career goals. Often school field trips and assemblies are severely limited or eliminated altogether in order to satisfy increasing instructional requirements in schools. In the future, it will be up to community and church organizations to provide these experiences for students.

Planned activities can include attending plays or concerts, visiting colleges and universities, meeting black elected officials, and touring minority-owned businesses. One community group we encountered--composed

primarily of single, urban parents--sponsors a variety of trips like these around its city. Anotner group in a rural community sponsors minority speakers, provides field trips, and maintains a tutoring center. Efforts such as these can and must be undertaken in other communities if significant improvement in minority achievement and college enrollment is to occur.

Recommendation 9:

Sponsor structured career-planning programs for minority students in schools or the community and request that additional activities take place in the schools.

Based on our interviews, minority students are not being asked specifically about their career goals. Administering career tests and sponsoring career days in schools where students randomly choose from a pool of courses are not sufficient to make a significant impact on students. Kunjufu (1986) states that minority children, especially males, are being left to "stumble" into adulthood without sufficient guidance from parents, schools, and communities. We assert that minority students must be helped to make direct connections between their interests, skills, and abilities and the subsequent course selections, school and community activities, and behavioral and moral choices that they face. Understanding the connection between these things is an important first step to successful career attainment.

Career education teachers, school counselors, and other knowledgeable persons can be enlisted to answer the following series of questions for parents, pernaps in a workshop setting:

* Career planning steps - How do students decide on a specific career or field of employment? How do students identify their interests, skills, and abilities? When should students decide on a career?

* Career planning tests - When are these tests given? Must all students take them? How and by whom are these tests interpreted? What do career planning profiles indicate, and how should they be used by students and parents?

* Community involvement - What volunteer opportunities or community activities would be beneficial for students with specific career goals in mind? For example, are there tutoring opportunities available through the school or the church for students who have an interest in teaching? Does the local hospital or Red Cross use student volunteers who may be interested in medicine or nursing? What other organizations in the community are willing to offer internships for students who are interested in a particular field of employment?

* Resources - What books, tapes, or pamphlets are available to students to assist them in the career planning process? Are there minority adults in the community who are willing to serve as career information resources for students?

Minority children need the individual attention and continuity of contact that may be provided through the efforts of minority adults and organizations who know the students and their families and may, therefore, be more trusted by them. Children's dreams need to be connected with real-life experiences, especially ones in which minority adults are present.

Recommendation 10:

Bring minority educators together to discuss their role in recruiting future minority educators.

Many of the minority educators that we encounter readily acknowledge their vested interest in recruiting minority students into education. They appear eager to become involved in alleviating the minority teacher shortage. However, few communities are taking advantage of the willingness and expertise of this diminishing population. Minority educators may have conflicting or ambivalent opinions regarding the conditions of teaching, but they also can speak eloquently about the rewards and value of a career in education.

Often educators convey criticism of education without intending to do so and may neglect to provide "equal time" to comments reflecting the rewards they receive from working in education. In groups, minority educators can examine the messages that they give to students about the teaching profession and

design activities to encourage children to enter teaching. For example, teachers can identify promising students who are capable of becoming educators and let those students know that an adult is aware of their abilities. Minority teachers can make each other aware of students who are interested in teaching and who may need additional guidance and encouragement to pursue this goal. Counselors, administrators, and teachers can make students aware of the variety of occupations in education that may match a student's interests and abilities.

Final Notes:

Over time, minority communities have demonstrated enormous resilience and a capacity for survival. Members of these communities have developed a sensitivity and spirit of independence that makes them cautious about getting involved in projects that are sponsored by outsiders. Building trust, therefore, will require time and commitment.

Finally, if "Doing FINE" is to be truly beneficial for parents and their children, it must include practical activities that are described in useful detail, rather than broad generalizations. Minority parents and children have the desire to achieve their goals. They just need the tools.

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